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COUNTERING MASS VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

Desperate identities

A bio-psycho-social analysis of perpetrators of mass violence

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Research Summary: In this article, I provide a qualitative analysis of ten perpetrators of mass violence, including five school shooters and five attackers in nonschool settings (a random public shooting, a familicide, and three attacks by White supremacist homegrown violent extremists). The killers are discussed in terms of body-related issues, three psychological categories (psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized), and social failures. I describe how the attackers sought to overcome their perceived inadequacy, framed as damaged masculinity, through acts of violence. I also demonstrate the many factors that contribute to acts of mass violence.

Policy Implications: Violence prevention can be supported by policy initiatives in multiple domains, including mandating the use of threat assessment in educational settings, government support for expanding the use of threat assessment across the nation, training professionals engaged in threat assessment in the broad factors that contribute to mass violence, educating the public about mental health issues, destigmatizing the use of mental health services, increasing access to mental health treatment, and improving child protective services.

KEYWORDS

bio-psycho-social, damaged masculinity, homegrown violent extremists, mass murderers, mass violence, psychology, rampage attacks, school shooters, typology, white supremacists

1 | INTRODUCTION

The fundamental question when studying people who engage in aberrant behavior is as follows: What makes these people different from everyone else? When it comes to mass murder, the question becomes most urgent.

Researchers who study the perpetrators of mass violence have noted identity issues as a significant factor. Newman said of teenage school shooters: "[I]n addition to failing at adolescence, they were—at least in their own eyes—failing at manhood" (2004, p. 143). Kellner viewed school shootings as acts of violence that were driven by "crises in masculinities in which young men use guns and violence to create ultramasculine identities" (2013, p. 497).

Scholars who study homegrown violent extremists have noted similar themes. Bergen described these perpetrators as "Zeros trying to be heroes. . . . Losers who attached themselves to extremist right-wing ideologies that gave meaning to their otherwise dead-end lives" (2018, para. 1, 3). Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, and Orehek viewed terrorists in terms of "the quest for personal significance" (2009, p. 331).

Most people who struggle with their masculinity or who feel insignificant, however, do not commit acts of mass violence. Thus, the question, "why these particular people?" still needs to be answered. In this article, I explore a wide range of factors in the lives of perpetrators of mass violence. Based on previous research (Langman, 2009, 2015b, 2017), these factors are categorized into three domains: biological, psychological, and social.

1.1 | Biological/body-related issues

One type of biological influence on violent behavior occurs in the brain as a result of problematic pregnancies, difficult births, oxygen deprivation, and other medical difficulties (Raine, 2013). Although some of the shooters in this study experienced these problems, the primary focus here is on body-related issues.

Body-related issues are factors that may interfere with the development of a positive male identity, result in teasing, or pose challenges in terms of dating and sexuality. This includes birth defects, illnesses, injuries, and lack of athletic ability, as well as appearance-related factors such as obesity, severe acne, having an odd facial appearance, or being unusually short (Langman, 2015b, 2018a).

1.2 | Psychological typology

The psychological domain is divided into psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized shooters (Langman, 2009, 2015b). Even though psychopathy is not a recognized diagnosis, there is a rich literature on the concept. The works used to develop the concept of the psychopathic shooter include Hare (1999) and Millon and Davis (1996, 1998). Psychopathic shooters are narcissistic, entitled, and callous. They may also be sadistic and prone to explosive rage (Langman, 2009, 2015b; Millon & Davis, 1998).

The psychotic shooters had symptoms of schizophrenia or schizotypal personality disorder, including hallucinations and/or delusions, odd thoughts, bizarre preoccupations, paranoid thinking, and significantly impaired social and emotional functioning. Although schizotypal is classified as a personality disorder rather than as a psychotic disorder, it can involve psychotic symptoms (Millon & Davis, 1996). Also, some common schizotypal symptoms resemble psychotic symptoms. These include paranoid thinking versus paranoid delusions, unusual perceptual experiences versus hallucinations, and ideas of reference versus delusions of reference (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These similarities can make it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish schizophrenia from schizotypal personality disorder. As a result, the two disorders are subsumed within the psychotic category of the typology.

It should be noted that being psychotic does not render a person incapable of organized behavior; many mass killers have been able to plan, prepare for, and execute an attack (Langman, 2009, 2015b).

Whereas both the psychopathic and psychotic shooters generally come from stable, intact families, traumatized shooters come from severely dysfunctional homes. Their families are notable for substance abuse and criminal behavior by the parents, as well as for domestic violence and physical abuse of the children. In some cases, the perpetrators are also sexually abused by someone in the family, in the neighborhood, or in a foster home. Growing up in a violent, dysfunctional home can elevate the risk of violence dramatically (Garbarino, 1999).

These three types are not mutually exclusive; several perpetrators have had elements of two of the three categories (Langman, 2015b).

1.3 | Social factors

The domain of social factors covers a broad range of life stresses and influences, including failures and rejections, consequences for misconduct, interpersonal conflicts, role models and ideologies that support violence, and the appeal of achieving notoriety through violence.

1.4 | Cross-domain factors

Some issues do not fit easily into any one domain. These cross-domain factors include parentage (biological vs. adopted), racial-ethnic identity, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and the impact of physical and sexual abuse.

1.5 | Significance of a bio-psycho-social approach

The goal of using a multidomain perspective is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon, acknowledging the many factors that may contribute to acts of mass violence. Because mass attacks are statistically extremely rare, it is important to learn as much as possible about the perpetrators to understand better the forces that influenced them. Additionally, use of this approach highlights the many potential points of intervention to reduce mass violence, including changes in policy and practice in education, law enforcement, and mental health.

The central focus of threat assessment is to identify warning signs—such as threats—that someone may be planning an act of violence. Many people, however, make threats that they do not mean, or talk about acts of violence without intending to commit one. Thus, people can be falsely identified as risks. In addition, for law enforcement agencies that receive an overwhelming number of calls relating to concerns of possible violence, it can be daunting to sift through the cases and decide which ones warrant a major expenditure of resources.

Therefore, a thorough threat assessment should consider more than just behavioral warning signs. For example, the detailed threat assessment guidelines provided by Cornell (2018) go beyond warning signs to also highlight the psychological characteristics of the person in question. Similarly, Calhoun and Weston (2013) noted the importance of psychological distress, medical problems, and significant losses that could contribute to violence risk. The bio-psycho-social approach used here is intended to build on these works to help provide a larger framework for thinking about perpetrators of mass violence and risk assessment.

1.6 | Selection process

Two considerations guided the selection process of perpetrators to present in this article. First, to conduct a bio-psycho-social analysis requires that relevant information is available for all three domains. Thus, only perpetrators for whom meaningful information was available could be included. It should

be noted, however, that there may be significant gaps, especially regarding childhood medical information, psychiatric symptoms, and details about sexual interests and behaviors.

Second, to make the findings as broadly relevant as possible, perpetrators were chosen who committed different kinds of attacks. This includes school-related violence as well as attacks in other venues. It also includes random, indiscriminate attacks in which the victims had no relationship to the killer, as well as attacks that were either targeted against specific people known to the perpetrators or against a specific group of people. Finally, even though most attacks had no connection to a political ideology, three attacks had ideological justifications.

All of the attacks except for one occurred in the United States. Anders Breivik, who committed his attack in Norway, was included because of the wealth of information available about him and the light this sheds on perpetrators of mass violence. It is also noteworthy that the same dynamics seem to operate in a mass killer from outside the United States as with domestic mass killers. In fact, similar patterns have been found among school shooters from Finland, Scotland, Canada, Germany, and Brazil (Langman, 2015b). These international examples demonstrate that the dynamics presented here are not unique to perpetrators in the United States.

The ten perpetrators ranged in age from 17 to 32, with an average age of 22.3 years. This is a young sample for mass murderers; many other mass killers are significantly older (Blair & Schweit, 2014; Langman, 2015b; U.S. Secret Service, 2018). This sample is not intended to be representative of the range of mass killers—that would require a much larger study. The purpose of this sample is to demonstrate common patterns among mass killers, regardless of the types of attack they committed.

2 | SCHOOL SHOOTERS

The five school shooters include a cross section of the three psychological types, as well as the three populations of school shooters. These populations are secondary school shooters (Eric Harris, Eric Houston), college shooters (Seung Hui Cho), and aberrant adult shooters (Elliot Rodger, Adam Lanza), who are defined as adults with no current or recent connection to the schools they attacked (Langman, 2015b).

Elliot Rodger

Date: 23 May 2014	**Killed**: 6
Age: 22	**Wounded**: 14
School: University of California at Santa Barbara	**Outcome**: Suicide
Location: Isla Vista, California	

All his life, Elliot Rodger was socially anxious and awkward. The central failure of his life was his inability to have sex with a woman. He wrote obsessively about this, referring to himself as a “kissless virgin” (Rodger, 2014, pp. 66, 68, 107). He suffered agony when he saw couples together or heard that his peers were having sex. He could not fathom why he was not having sex and raged against women for rejecting him and men for succeeding where he was failing.

He also failed in other domains. He took classes at three different colleges but kept dropping out and did not come close to completing a degree. He also had no job and no career direction. At the age of 22, he was unemployed, uneducated, essentially friendless, and a virgin.

In his own words, Rodger’s sense of biological inferiority began in fourth grade:

> *I was the shortest kid in my class—even the girls were taller than me. . . . I became extremely annoyed at how everyone was taller than me, and how the tallest boys were*

automatically respected more. It instilled the first feelings of inferiority in me (Rodger, 2014, p. 15).

He was so upset about being short that he tried to make himself taller by "lying on the ground in the basketball court trying to stretch my body as much as I could" (Rodger, 2014, p. 16). Not only was Rodger short, but he wrote, "I was physically weak compared to other boys my age. Even boys younger than me were stronger" (p. 16).

Another problem was his mixed ancestry. He wrote, "I am half White, half Asian, and this made me different from the normal fully-white kids that I was trying to fit in with" (Rodger, 2014, p. 17). Being half-White felt like a biological deficit. He clung to his British ancestry in an effort to make himself feel important: "I am beautiful, and I am half white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy" (p. 84).

Rodger dealt with his profound sense of inadequacy by creating an alternative reality in which he was an exalted being:

Humanity has never accepted me among them, and now I know why. I am more than human. I am superior to them all. I am Elliot Rodger … Magnificent, glorious, supreme, eminent … Divine! I am the closest thing there is to a living god (Rodger, 2014, p. 135).

Rodger had traits of psychopathy and psychotic symptoms (Langman, 2014). Even though his grandiose self-concept could be viewed as the narcissism of a psychopath, it was so extreme that it seems better understood as a delusion of grandeur.

He envisioned himself as the all-powerful ruler of the world in which he would seek his revenge on women for rejecting him: "In order to completely abolish sex, women themselves would have to be abolished. All women must be quarantined like the plague they are" (Rodger, 2014, p. 136).

As a result of his own failures with women, he became obsessed with the idea of eliminating love and sex from humanity. He engaged in bizarre ruminations of imprisoning women in concentration camps, killing most of them, but sparing a few for reproduction:

They will be artificially inseminated with sperm samples in order to produce offspring. Their depraved nature will slowly be bred out of them in time. Future generations of men would be oblivious to these remaining women's existence. Sexuality will completely cease to exist. Love will cease to exist (Rodger, 2014, p. 136).

His psychopathy was evident in his entitlement, callousness, and in particular, his sadism:

I will torture some of the good looking people before I kill them. . . . I will cut them, flay them, strip all the skin off their flesh, and pour boiling water all over them while they are still alive, as well as any other form of torture I could possibly think of. When they are dead, I will behead them and keep their heads in a bag (Rodger, 2014, p. 132).

Rodger's writings are full of his lamentations about his failures, his inferiority, and how he felt small, vulnerable, and pathetic. He sought to cure his sense of damaged masculinity through violence. He wrote, "After I picked up the handgun, I brought it back to my room and felt a new sense of power. I was now armed. "*Who's the alpha male now, bitches?*" (Rodger, 2014, p. 113, italics in original).

Rodger conducted online searches related to Hitler, Nazis, Himmler, and Goebbels (Brown, 2015). Other mass shooters have also been drawn to the Nazis (Langman, 2018b). Why the Nazis? Perhaps as

someone who felt pathetically weak, Rodger was drawn to Nazi power. In addition, by clinging to the part of him that was "White," maybe he was identifying with the Nazi ideology of racial superiority. Why would this be appealing? Because he felt biologically inferior. Being a member of the master race, however, might alleviate his sense of inferiority. Finally, the Nazi ideology might have supported his desire to kill people he believed deserved to die. The ruthless brutality of the Nazis may have validated his sadistic urges.

Erich Fromm wrote about the dynamics of the sadistic personality as follows: "He is sadistic because he feels impotent, unalive, and powerless. He tries to compensate for this lack by having power over others, transforming the worm he feels himself to be into a god" (1973, p. 292). This captures the dynamics of Rodger's striving for significance, using violence to transform himself from being a pathetic, kissless virgin into an alpha male.

Eric Harris

Date: 20 April 1999

Age: 18

School: Columbine High School

Location: Jefferson County, Colorado

Killed: 8 (estimated)

Wounded: 13 (estimated)

Outcome: Suicide

Eric Harris was born with two birth defects. As an infant, he had a congenital leg problem that resulted in a dozen medical appointments by the time he was 19 months old (Langman, 2009). Even though we do not know the nature of this problem nor its impact on Harris, it may have affected both his physical and psychological development.

The second body-related problem was a chest deformity (pectus excavatum) that resulted in surgeries at ages 12 and 13. Thus, on the cusp of puberty, Harris was dealing with a flawed physique. For someone who grew up on military bases and aspired to become a Marine, having a chest deformity may have been devastating. In fact, Harris once drew a picture that may have been an image of how he liked to think of himself. The figure is humanoid but with large horns that suggest virility and a massive, muscular chest—the very feature that he did not have (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office [JCSO] Columbine Documents, 1999, p. 10,427).

Harris wrote in his journal about being picked on for "how fucking weak I am" (Harris, 1999b, p. 8). In addition, a peer reportedly made fun of him for having a big head on a skinny body (JCSO, 1999, p. 10,273). Harris wrote about his hatred of others being rooted in a hatred of himself:

> *I make fun of people who look like me, sometimes without even thinking sometimes just because I want to rip on myself. That's where a lot of my hate grows from. The fact that I have practically no self-esteem, especially concerning girls and looks and such (Harris, 1999b, p. 8).*

Like Elliot Rodger, Harris was also drawn to the Nazis. He wrote, "I love the Nazis. . . . I love their beliefs and who they were, what they did, and what they wanted" (Harris, 1999b, p. 8). Perhaps, like Rodger, Harris sought a connection to power, a solution to his biological inferiority by identifying with the so-called "master race," and a justification for murdering people he considered unfit for life. In addition, the Nazis provided a role model of hypermasculinity:

> *The macho, militaristic image of the Nazis was appealing to Eric, who was small, had a sunken chest, and felt weak and inadequate. Identifying with the Nazis was a way of establishing for himself an image of hard, tough masculinity. A peer commented that Eric*

wore steel-toed combat boots to school and "was into combat more than anyone else I've ever seen" (Langman, 2009, p. 28).

In the last entry in his journal, Harris refers to himself as "the weird looking Eric KID" (Harris, 1999b, p. 11). By capitalizing the word "KID," he indicated that he was not a man. His fascination with the Nazis may have been his effort to convince himself of his masculinity.

Harris experienced a variety of social stresses. He was suspended for hacking into the school's computer system. He was arrested for breaking into an electrician's van and stealing equipment. His dream of being a Marine would not come to pass.

Perhaps his most significant failures, however, were related to girls. Even though he went on dates, he never had a girlfriend and apparently never had sex. This was a major issue for him. Even as he was planning what he hoped would be the worst act of mass murder in the history of the United States, he was preoccupied with sex. On November 12, 1998, he wrote, "Maybe I just need to get laid. Maybe that'll just change some shit around" (Harris, 1999b, p. 9). On April 3, 1999, in his last entry, he wrote, "Right now I'm trying to get fucked … why the fuck can't I get any?" (Harris, 1999b, p. 11). Just over two weeks before the attack, he was trying hard to find a girl to have sex with—and failing. He also tried desperately to get a date for the senior prom—and failed.

Harris was profoundly narcissistic and entitled. He wrote, "I feel like God and I wish I was, having everyone being OFFICIALLY lower than me" (Harris, 1999b, p. 2) and "My belief is that if I say something, it goes. I am the law, if you don't like it, you die." (Harris, 1999a, p. 10). He had no respect for morality, with numerous comments on this theme: "There is no such thing as True Good and True evil" and "'Morals' is just another word" (Harris, 1999b, pp. 5, 6).

Harris positioned himself as a superior being who looked with contempt on racial/ethnic minorities: "People always say we shouldn't be racist. Why not? Blacks ARE different. Like it or not they are. They started out on the bottom so why not keep 'em there;" "Fuck the niggers and spics and chinks" (Harris, 1999b, pp. 5, 7). He wrote enthusiastically about "natural selection" as justification for eliminating inferior people from the world, with almost everyone being seen as inferior.

He was also sadistic and fantasized about raping girls he knew, torturing people, and mutilating and killing someone—and enjoying it:

I want to tear a throat out with my own teeth like a pop can. I want to gut someone with my hand, to tear a head off and rip out the heart and lungs from the neck, to stab someone in the gut, shove it up to their heart, and yank the fucking blade out of their rib cage! I want to grab some weak little freshman and just tear them apart like a wolf, show them who is god. Strangle them, squish their head, bite their temples in the skull, rip off their jaw, rip off their collar bones, break their arms in half and twist them around, the lovely sounds of bones cracking and flesh ripping, ahhh … so much to do and so little chances (Harris, 1999b, p. 9).

Just as Elliot Rodger felt like an alpha male when he bought a gun, when Harris obtained his guns, he wrote, "I am fucking armed. I feel more confident, stronger, more God-like" (Harris, 1999b, p. 10).

Harris wrote, "I would love to be the ultimate judge and say if a person lives or dies—be godlike" (Harris, 1999a, p. 44). He also sought fame: "I want to leave a lasting impression on the world." (Harris, 1999a, p. 39). On April 20, 1999, both wishes came true as he gunned down his peers and laughed with sadistic delight. As sadism elevated Rodger from a "kissless virgin" into an alpha male, sadistic violence transformed Harris from the "weird looking Eric KID" into a god-like being with the power of life and death.

Adam Lanza

Date: 14 December 2012 **Killed**: 27

Age: 20 **Wounded**: 2

School: Sandy Hook Elementary School **Outcome**: Suicide

Location: Newtown, Connecticut

Adam Lanza's mother had a difficult pregnancy with him, including "hypoglycemia, hypotension, and decreased fetal movement" that resulted in a Cesarean section. Even though he appeared healthy at birth, "[h]e apparently had an episode of apnea during which he stopped breathing at eight days old and was admitted to the hospital" (Office of the Child Advocate, 2014, p. 15). Perhaps as a result of these medical problems, Lanza experienced developmental delays.

Lanza was timid to the point of being frequently nonverbal. He also had severe sensitivity to light and sound that made it difficult for him to function in social settings. Even in his own home, his mother instructed people working on the yard not to ring the doorbell because it would upset him (Langman, 2015a).

Lanza was obsessed with being as thin as possible; as a result, he had almost no muscle. Even though he was 6 feet tall, he was emaciated, weighing only 112 pounds (Sedensky, 2013, p. 27). In addition, Lanza reportedly walked with "a stiff, lumbering gait" that suggests poor coordination (Solomon, 2014, para. 12). He apparently aspired to traditional masculinity, however, wanting to be a Marine just like his Uncle Jim. Whereas Eric Harris drew a picture of an ultramasculine being, Lanza created an online persona that was notable for being the opposite of himself: "The skinny and frail teenager chose to create an imposing, bulky, muscle-bound soldier dressed in desert camouflage" (Lysiak, 2013, p. 56).

Even though much of Lanza's psychological dynamics are elusive (Langman, 2015a), he is categorized as a psychotic shooter, with what seems to have been undiagnosed schizophrenia. An e-mail he sent records his first major psychotic episode:

> *I began to "see" many different things. Although I knew that none of it was actually real, it came as close to being real as it could be for me without it being physically tangible. I heard screaming around me, and I had an overwhelming sense that there was someone dead behind me. I kept seeing silhouettes of flickering people everywhere. I felt like I had to cry. . . . I had never had that sort of delusional hysteria before (Coleman, 2015, p. 2).*

Besides his psychotic symptoms, many of Lanza's traits that indicated a possible autism-spectrum diagnosis could be understood as manifestations of schizophrenia. These included his sensory sensitivities, reported deficiency in pain sensation, flat affect, poverty of speech, and episodes in which he withdrew from interaction and appeared catatonic: "'It was like he would go into a trance," one student remembered. "It was a little scary. . . . He just seemed vacant. Like he wasn't there'" (Lysiak, 2013, p. 43).

Lanza was at times painfully aware of his deficits. In elementary school, he wrote the words "loser" and "ugly" on his hand. When he struggled with his college classes, he often cried with frustration and called himself a loser (Langman, 2015a).

Even though he communicated with people online, he did not have any friends. Regarding romance and sexuality, Lanza himself was at a loss: "I'm pretty confused when it comes to my sexuality" (Coleman, 2015, p. 6). He had homosexual content on his computer and wrote at length about pedophilia, defending the practice but denying he was a pedophile.

His sexual identity also seems enigmatic. In completing a form for college, on the item about gender, Lanza wrote, "I choose not to answer" (Goldstein, 2013, para. 2). Was he perhaps not certain of his

gender? Further complicating the picture, Lanza posted online: “I castrated myself when I was 15 to rebel against society” (Coleman, 2014, p. 6). Was this a joke? Even if it was, why say such a thing? And if it was not a joke, it indicates profound disturbance. When genital mutilation does occur, it is most commonly associated with psychosis (Walsh, 2014).

Another online post is noteworthy. He viewed a safe-sex ad with “an animated drawing of a penis traveling around a bathroom (graffiti) wall looking for a mate, and getting rejected. At the very end, it puts on a condom and is welcomed by several drawings of vaginas.” Lanza’s response was, “In reality, the penis at the end would get a gun and go on a rampage. No seriously” (Langman, 2015a, p. 6). Apparently in Lanza’s view, sexual frustration would lead to mass murder.

Lanza had puzzling hostility toward women, including his mother. In fifth grade, he wrote a story in which a boy shoots his mother in her head; ten years later, Lanza did just that. When someone online made a comment about having sex with his mother, Lanza responded by writing, “We will fuck her together! Then kill her and dispose of the corpse” (Langman, 2015a, p. 7). Was Lanza just trying to be provocative? Even if he were, that is a strange comment. He also wrote about women being selfish, and elsewhere he commented, “Fuckin women just use their pussy all day long, use it to get money, use it to get power” (Langman, 2015a, p. 8).

At age 20, Lanza was unemployed, unenrolled (he had attended a college and a university but had given up), friendless, and without a significant other. He had also cut himself off from his father and brother for the last 2 years of his life (his parents were divorced, and his brother had moved out), and only communicated with his mother by e-mail even though they lived in the same house. He apparently spent his time playing video games, watching movies, and using the Internet. He was isolated and incapable of functioning in society.

When his mother discouraged him from trying to enlist in the Marines, Lanza took it badly. He seemed fixated on being a Marine. In fact, “in the months leading up to the massacre, Lanza would dress himself up head to toe in a camouflage military uniform and target shoot with a pellet gun in his basement” (Lysiak & Schapiro, 2013, para. 19). When Lanza committed his attack, he was dressed in military clothes. Perhaps the attack was his effort to transform himself from a weak, devastatingly anxious loser into the Marine he dreamed of being.

Eric Houston

Date: 1 May 1992	**Killed**: 4
Age: 20	**Wounded**: 10
School: Lindhurst High School	**Outcome**: Prison
Location: Oliverhurst, California	

Just a month before Eric Houston was born, his mother was hospitalized with pneumonia; she was given oxygen and a drug to keep her from giving birth (*California v. Houston*, 2007). Houston was an unusually sickly child whose infancy was plagued by encephalitis, severe pneumonia, meningitis, and asthma. He spent approximately 2 weeks in the hospital with meningitis and reportedly “went backwards” in his development after a bout of pneumonia. He was delayed in reaching multiple developmental milestones, perhaps, as a result of his illnesses. After the attack, an evaluator concluded that Houston had “organic brain syndrome lateralized in the left hemisphere” (*California v. Houston*, 2008, p. 92).

Another concern is that Houston believed he had been adopted even though his parents denied this. If this were true, it meant that he was not the biological child of his mother and father and would raise the question of who his biological parents were. This remains a mystery.

Whether or not Houston was sexually abused is unknown, but his grandfather was a sex offender who victimized at least one family member. In addition, there is evidence to indicate that Houston may have

been confused about his sexual identity, or that someone in the family may have created confusion. A photograph of Houston at approximately 3 years of age shows him wearing a dress. Houston's middle name was Christopher and on the back of the photo is written, "See, daddy, Chris was a good girl. You never believe he's a boy" (*California v. Houston*, 2008, p. 100). This is a confusing message, and if Houston was only 3 (and developmentally delayed), then he would not have been the one to write the message.

The potential impact of this may be seen in Houston's obsession with the military, weapons, and SWAT teams as soon as he hit puberty. He may have sought out these masculine interests to compensate for his confused gender identity.

Adding further complications, Houston was molested during high school by a male teacher. The molestations reportedly tore skin on his penis and caused bruising and painful urination (*California v. Houston*, 2007). The molestation raised profound questions for Houston about his sexuality. He experimented with homosexual contacts and blamed his teacher for his homosexual feelings. He also, however, was attracted to girls and had at least one girlfriend.

In addition to being molested by his high school teacher, Houston grew up in a markedly dysfunctional family. Houston was:

> *born into a family plagued by incest, alcoholism, physical abuse, suicide, and murder. His mother was physically abused by multiple relatives. His aunt was molested by Houston's grandfather. His uncle murdered three people in a fight. A grandmother died by suicide. Houston's father was a violent alcoholic who abandoned the family (Langman, 2015b, p. 57).*

The social stresses on Houston were overwhelming. As a result of the unstable family, he moved frequently, disrupting his friendships and his education. He struggled in school as a special needs student: "At the end of third grade he was still performing as a beginning first grader; after three years of school he was three years behind" (Langman, 2015b, p. 58).

As a teenager, he struggled with romantic relationships with both males and females, and when a girlfriend broke up with him, he attempted suicide. He was being pressured by a male to have a relationship with him, but Houston was confused about his sexuality.

The teacher who molested Houston also failed him for the year, preventing him from graduating and thus from joining the military, which was his career aspiration. With no diploma, his work opportunities were limited. In response to his mother's pressure to move out, he became severely anxious. Houston began using alcohol and marijuana. He also studied Satanism, witchcraft, and the occult. Like other shooters' fascination with the Nazis, this interest may have been a manifestation of his desire to connect with a source of power.

In keeping with his fascination with ultramasculinity, Houston was obsessed with the movie *The Terminator*. He reportedly watched it 23 times, including the night before his attack (*California v. Houston*, 2007). He also had a collection of military magazines, a book on police tactics, and a combat manual for Marines. In fact, he was dressed in military garb during his attack, with one student commenting that Houston looked like he had just come from Desert Storm (*California v. Houston*, 2007).

Perhaps his attack was his way of getting to be the soldier he was denied being in real life. His stated purpose was to kill the teacher who molested him (which he did), as well as to alert the world to the abuse and thereby protect other children. Instead of protecting children, however, he shot innocent students. Besides revenge, he seemed to feel the need to escape being a confused, overwhelmed young man and become a fearsome figure. A psychologist said that Houston had a "Savior Syndrome" in

which he saw himself as "bigger and more powerful and mightier" than other people (*California v. Houston*, 2008, p. 99). A friend said that Houston wanted to be a terrorist and live out a fantasy like a *Terminator* movie (Bowman, 1992).

Seung Hui Cho

Date: 16 April 2007	**Killed**: 32
Age: 23	**Wounded**: 17
School: Virginia Tech	**Outcome**: Suicide
Location: Blacksburg, Virginia	

Cho's health problems began early in life. In infancy, he was hospitalized with whooping cough and pneumonia. As a toddler, he had a problem with his heart and an investigative procedure reportedly traumatized him: "From that point on, Cho did not like to be touched. He generally was perceived as medically frail. According to his mother, he cried a lot and was constantly sick" (Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007, p. 32).

As a young man, Cho apparently was self-conscious about being thin and weak and was observed working out in the university gym. Despite his efforts to become stronger, "the autopsy report remarked about his lack of muscle for the body of a 23-year-old male" (Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007, p. N-3).

Cho had failures in multiple domains. When he sent a novel to a publisher, it was rejected. Cho sought female company, but his attention was unwanted and three times women complained about him to campus police, who then told Cho to leave the women alone. Not long before his rampage, he hired a woman from an escort service. She took off some of her clothes and danced in front of him, but when he tried to initiate sexual activity, she reportedly pushed him away and left (Parry, 2007). Even with a hired woman, he was a failure.

Cho manifested symptoms of schizophrenia such as poverty of speech and flat affect. He also presented with bizarre behavior indicating multiple delusions and confusion about his identity (Langman, 2009). In addition, his manifesto is full of vivid imagery of victimization that had no basis in reality: "Congratulations. You have succeeded in extinguishing my life. Vandalizing my heart wasn't enough for you. Raping my soul wasn't enough for you. Committing emotional sodomy on me wasn't enough for you" (Cho, 2007, p. 1). The manifesto also reveals Cho's delusions of grandeur: "Thanks to you, I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the Weak and Defenseless people. . . . Like Moses, I spread the sea and lead my people" (Cho, 2007, p. 1).

He had no friends but longed to be able to join in with his peers. The first line of his manifesto says, "Oh the happiness I could have had mingling among you hedonists, being counted as one of you" (Cho, 2007, p. 1). Cho wrote a poem called "A Boy Named LOSER" that includes the following:

> *Darn straight! This boy really is LOSER—LOSER with no life!*
> *And he knows it. But he (what can he do) likes to live in his pathetic dream*
> *Drowning down in his little quirky house anyway*—My Gawd! What a LOSER! *(Cho, n.d., p. 2).*

How did Cho cope with being a loser with no friends, no girlfriends, and no hope for anything better? He created an alternate identity for himself. He signed his manifesto, "I am Ax Ishmael. I am the Anti-Terrorist of America" (Cho, 2007, p. 4). Violence transformed him from being a pathetic loser into Ax Ishmael, a force of destruction:

the vendetta you have witnessed today will reverberate throughout every home and every soul in America … We will raise hell on earth that the world has never witnessed. Millions of deaths and millions of gallons of blood on the streets will not quench the avenging phoenix that you have caused us to unleash (p. 3).

3 | OTHER MASS ATTACKERS

The perpetrators who did not commit school shootings are divided into ideological and nonideological categories. Among the nonideological killers, James Holmes committed a random attack against strangers in a movie theatre, and Clay Shrout committed a targeted attack against his family. The targets of the ideological killers included African Americans (Dylann Roof), employees of the Norwegian federal government and adolescents at a politically liberal summer camp (Anders Breivik), and employees of the U.S. federal government (Timothy McVeigh).

James Holmes

Date: 20 July 2012
Age: 24
Venue: Century 16 Cinema
Location: Aurora, Colorado

Killed: 12
Wounded: 58
Outcome: Prison

James Holmes was preoccupied with multiple aspects of his body. In fact, he diagnosed himself with body dysmorphic disorder, a condition in which a person is obsessed with a flaw in his appearance that is not perceived by others. In his journal, he wrote about his teeth, nose, ears, and eyes. He also had problems with his penis: "Concern with cock. Suffered accidents as child. Allergic reaction to sex – scarring. . . . Other event – a slab of skin tore away, did not heal" (Holmes, 2012, p. 12). What accidents happened to his genitals, and how? How severe was the scarring? How did skin tear away? Was he deliberately abusing himself? The answers to these questions are unknown. A week before his rampage, Holmes hired a prostitute but was unable to perform sexually (Lysiak & Chapman, 2012).

Holmes wanted to be perceived not only as masculine but also as dangerous. He took selfies to leave a legacy as "a tough guy" with "a dangerous quality." He sought to portray himself as "this isn't someone you want to mess with" (Reid, 2018, pp. 90–91).

Holmes believed he had "a broken brain." Interestingly, brain scans done after the attack found abnormalities in several areas (Reid, 2018, pp. 228–229). He wrote in his journal a list of a dozen psychiatric diagnoses he believed he had, including PTSD and schizophrenia. The reference to PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) raises the question of what trauma he may have endured. The self-diagnosis of schizophrenia seems to have been accurate. In high school, he began having intrusive thoughts of killing people, seeing images of "saws going against other people" and people "getting their heads cut off" (Reid, 2018, p. 23). As an adult, he had visual hallucinations, seeing figures with guns and figures juggling heads. Holmes "talked about a sense that a 'master power' had taken over his life" (Reid, 2018, p. 171). His behavior in prison after the attack was notable for severe psychosis.

He also had delusional thoughts prior to the attack, believing that his own self-worth—which he referred to as human capital—would be increased by killing people: "You take away human life and your human capital is limitless" (Reid, 2018, p. 57). This was the closest thing to a rationale that he seemed to have—that killing others would somehow enhance his own metaphysical strength.

Socially, Holmes was severely anxious and had difficulty speaking to people. As a graduate student, he had his first and only romantic relationship, which the woman ended. Other stresses included

dropping out of his Ph.D. program and having his application for unemployment benefits be denied. He had profiles on multiple dating sites that he kept checking until his attack, but there were no messages. And as noted, a week before his attack, he failed to perform with a prostitute.

In his notebook shortly before the attack, he wrote, “Embraced the hatred, a dark k/night rises” (Reid, 2018, p. 99). The man with a damaged body and a broken brain was reborn as a dark knight.

Clay Shrout

Date: 26 May 1994 **Killed**: 4

Age: 17 **Wounded**: 0

Venue: His family home **Outcome**: Prison

Location: Union, Kentucky

Shrout’s medical history is unknown, but he did have body-related issues. As a teen, he was overweight and used a medication to slim down. According to one source, he went “from a chubby to a frail teen-ager” (Long, 1994, para: 11). Another source described him as a “slight, bespectacled youth” and referred to his “frailty and sports ineptitude” (Popyk, 1998, para. 4, 6). During high school, he reportedly began dressing in black and wearing combat boots.

His frailty and ineptitude may explain two of his interests. First, he was obsessed with weapons, “Amassing a collection of knives, num-chucks, death stars, brass knuckles, a sword and a BB gun. . . . He bragged he could build a bomb that would ‘blow up the whole neighborhood’” (Langman, 2016, p. 2). Elliot Rodger and Eric Harris enhanced their power through weapons; Shrout may have done the same.

His second noteworthy interest was (as with Eric Houston) the occult, including Satanism and magic spells. This, too, may have been an effort to increase his sense of power. A friend commented, “I think Clay was trying to give himself a tougher, scarier image” (Popyk, 1998, para. 37).

Shrout killed his mother, father, and two younger sisters with shots to the head. He also intended to kill a teacher and an administrator at school. After holding a class hostage at gunpoint, however, he surrendered (Langman, 2016). What stresses might have contributed to his violence? He was angry at his parents for giving him consequences for misconduct and for expecting him to attend college. He was angry at the administrator for consequences received after he brought a stun-gun to school; Shrout drew a picture of him “tied to a pole with gasoline poured around him” (Langman, 2016, p. 3). Shrout also felt mistreated by a teacher for a lower grade than he thought he deserved and because the teacher called his parents when he failed to hand in an important assignment.

As justifications for murder, such reasons are trivial, even bizarre. They indicate such extreme narcissism that expectations are intolerable and consequences are an injustice. Why? He apparently believed he should be above the rules and able to do whatever he wanted.

Were there other stresses? He had been an outstanding student, but his grades had dropped to C’s, D’s, and F’s. Also, he was dumped by a girl; the break-up reportedly resulted in depression and suicidal thoughts (Langman, 2016).

Shrout’s lack of emotion after the murder of his family indicates psychopathic callousness. As he left the house, he announced to a stranger, “My name is Clay Shrout, and you’re going to hear a lot about me today. I’m going to be on CNN” (Popyk, 1998, para. 65). Not only was the lack of emotion appalling, but he was excited about becoming known. A friend thought Shrout would enjoy the media attention, noting, “He always wanted to make it big” (Estep, 1994, para. 21). Another friend said, “He wanted attention. He wanted to show everyone that he was someone. . . . He did that. Now, there’s no more identity crisis. Now, he knows who he is—a killer” (Popyk, 1998, para. 76). A police officer stated, “He’s probably the darkest person I’ve come into contact with” (Long, 2004, para. 15).

Dylann Roof

Date: 17 June 2015	**Killed**: 9
Age: 21	**Wounded**: 1
Venue: Emanuel A.M.E. Church	**Outcome**: Prison
Location: Charleston, South Carolina	

Dylann Roof was not an imposing figure; a reporter commented, “He is small to the point of fragility” (Cobb, 2017, para. 4). There are photos of him wearing a Gold’s Gym shirt with the image of a muscle-bound man on it; the irony is that Roof was so skinny that the shirt hung loosely on his body (Ghansah, 2017).

Like James Holmes, Roof suffered from body dysmorphic disorder, believing that his forehead was so unsightly that he never wanted anyone to see it. He had multiple odd beliefs or delusions regarding his body. He claimed he was born with syphilis and it was causing his brain to deteriorate (Hawes, 2017, May 16). He thought his arms and legs on one side of his body were different sizes than those on the other side. He also believed that testosterone was affecting only one side of his body, causing it to develop more than the other side (*United States of America v. Dylann Storm Roof*, 2017). He was also so self-conscious about his acne that he stopped going to school. In addition, he was convinced he had serious medical problems and went through numerous unnecessary medical tests and procedures (Hawes, 2017, May 12).

Roof seemed to think—like Elliot Rodger—that his bloodline gave him biological status: “My blood is mostly from the British Isles, but I have been blessed with a significant amount of German blood, and a German surname … My blood is representative of America” (Roof, 2015, p. 12).

Roof saw the world through a distorted lens. He believed that Hitler would be canonized as a saint (Collins, 2017). He also had grandiose ideas about himself, thinking that despite committing mass murder, he would receive a presidential pardon and then be given a high-level office such as governor of South Carolina (*United States of America v. Dylann Storm Roof*, 2016).

He not only had grandiose thoughts but paranoid thoughts, too. He believed that African Americans were engaged in a war to the death against White people, and that a media conspiracy hid this from the public. He was convinced that the White race was facing extinction. He was obsessed with the Confederacy and the Nazis, and he was hostile toward blacks, Jews, and Hispanics. He wrote, “Niggers are stupid and violent” (Roof, 2015, p. 5).

At age 21, Roof led an empty life. He commented, “I am in bed, so depressed I cannot get out of bed. My life is wasted. I have no friends” (Ghansah, 2017, para. 57). When asked whether he played video games, he said, “No, I literally look at the walls” (Ghansah, 2017, para. 56). He dropped out of school in ninth grade, hardly worked, never dated, and for years rarely left his house. His anxiety was so severe, a peer commented, “He was quiet, uncomfortably quiet, strangely quiet. I mean really strange” (Ghansah, 2017, para. 64).

Perhaps what is most striking about Roof is the utter absence of any distress or regret about his attack. He said, “Why would I be sorry for what I planned and did?” (Ballenger, 2017, p. 12).

Roof was not simply a racist who hated African Americans; to focus on his racism is to miss his bizarre somatic delusions, his paranoid belief that the White race was facing extinction, his grandiose conception of himself as a hero and future governor, and his inability to function in society as evidenced by his failures in education, occupation, and relationships. To say that racism was his rationale for violence begs the question of why—unlike almost every other racist—Roof was not only willing to kill but also proud of his massacre. Roof’s racism was rooted in his paranoia and the failure of his identity to sustain him; he clung to an ideology of superiority to salvage his sense of self. Similarly, violence served to propel him into the spotlight as a self-declared savior of the White race.

Anders Breivik

Date: 22 July 2011 | **Killed**: 77
Age: 32 | **Wounded**: 319
Venue: Government building/summer camp | **Outcome**: Prison
Location: Oslo and Utoya, Norway

Anders Breivik had multiple body-related concerns. One of his father figures thought he was a weakling, awkward, and clumsy (Seierstad, 2015, p. 63). At ages 12–13, he reportedly was unhappy "because he was so small" (Seierstad, 2015, p. 372). As a teenager, he was obsessed with his appearance and wore make-up; at age 20, he had plastic surgery on his nose (Seierstad, 2015, p. 84). Later on, he complained "I've grown so ugly" and wanted to get more surgery (Seierstad, 2015, p. 244).

Regarding his physique, he said, "I'm biologically weak. But I've compensated for that by working out" (Seierstad, 2013, p. 393). He did not just work out, but he used steroids for years (Borchgrevink, 2013, p. 10). Like other perpetrators, he was drawn to ideologies of racial superiority, believing the Nordic race was superior.

Breivik also was genetically loaded for psychiatric problems; his mother's mother was psychotic, with hallucinations and paranoid delusions, and his mother was disturbed in multiple ways, including paranoia. She was also highly sexualized, and there were concerns that she may have engaged in sexually inappropriate behavior with Breivik (Borchgrevink, 2013, pp. 256, 261). For example, she reportedly requested that a respite family allow her son to touch the man's penis in the shower because Breivik did not have a father-figure (Seierstad, 2015, p. 12). Interestingly, during his trial, Breivik complained that people were blaming his behavior on all kinds of things, including incest with his mother. There reportedly had been no allegations of incest—he was the only one to mention it (Borchgrevink, 2013, p. 256).

Breivik's psychological functioning is notable for paranoid thinking, grandiosity, and callousness. His paranoia manifested as terror that his racial/cultural group was on the brink of extinction and that he had "to prevent the ongoing genocide of the Nordic tribes" (Breivik, 2011, p. 1,153). He not only believed that Nordic peoples faced their extinction but that he was fighting against "the ongoing demographical annihilation of the Europeans" (Breivik, 2011, p. 1,154). Breivik did not simply attribute evil intentions to Muslim immigrants but believed that liberal Norwegian politicians were collaborating with the Muslims to sabotage their own country and culture (Seierstad, 2015, p. 444).

He felt threatened and contaminated by modern gender roles, complaining that he had been "feminized." His masculinity was so fragile that "when his mother makes him 'emotionally unstable', then in a way she also turns him into a woman" (Borchgrevink, 2013, p. 178). He not only sought to restore patriarchal gender roles but also wanted to control women's sexuality by outsourcing childbearing to women in poor countries; he even envisioned creating artificial wombs (p. 177). Like Elliot Rodger, Breivik "imagines a society in which women are practically non-existent, in which the sexual market is regulated by the state" (p. 177).

One of his most bizarre ideas was that he wanted each recruit to his movement to "remove his penis and testicles" to confirm that he is truly devoted to the cause (Breivik, 2011, p. 960). However this is interpreted, it is extremely strange.

Breivik also had sadistic fantasies. Whereas Elliot Rodger imagined beheading his victims, Breivik planned to behead the woman who was Norway's former prime minister; he intended to film this and post the video online (Borchgrevink, 2013, p. 180).

Breivik wanted to make a name for himself. When he encountered a celebrity in a bar, he said, "In one year's time, I'll be three times as famous as you" (Borchgrevink, 2013, p. 9). He referred to himself as a Knight Templar and a commander of European forces. When interrogated by the police, he said,

"In Norway I'm the overall leader of our organization. . . . I'm the supreme authority here" (Seierstad, 2015, p. 366). Even though he wrote and spoke of his organization as consisting of thousands of people in cells throughout Europe, there was no organization. It was all a delusion.

Breivik's callousness was evident during the attack when he gunned down teenagers at close range without emotion. In the wake of the attack, he was calm and even pleased with himself. There was no guilt or remorse. When he had to strip for an examination with the police, he began mugging for them and posturing in body-building poses. This behavior, in the wake of the worst violence in Norway since World War II, was appalling and bizarre.

Breivik's social skills were reportedly always odd. He had no close friends and had never had a serious relationship with a woman. In fact, it seemed he never dated, and multiple friends assumed he was gay (which he denied). He tried to get a mail-order bride from Eastern Europe; she came to Norway to meet him but rejected him as a husband. After the attack, several people reported to the police that they had homosexual contact with Breivik (Borchgrevink, 2013, p. 143).

Breivik failed in multiple domains. He had frequent schemes for getting rich that usually failed quickly. He did have success with selling fraudulent diplomas but broke numerous laws, shut the business down, and lost all the money he had gained. He was a high school dropout and never completed an educational degree. He tried to make a name for himself in a political group but failed.

Breivik responded to his failures by withdrawing from the world and creating an alternate identity for himself:

> *Five years before the massacre, Breivik isolated himself in a room at his mother's flat; he saw practically no one, refused visits, hardly ever went out, and just sat inside playing computer games … Incited by the power of his fantasies, especially by what they enabled him to become—a knight, a commander, a hero—he decided to bring them to life. He had been a nobody … by virtue of undertaking the inconceivable … he would become somebody (Knausgaard, 2015, para. 41).*

Timothy McVeigh

Date: 19 April 1995
Age: 26
Venue: Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building
Location: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
Killed: 168
Wounded: 680+
Outcome: Prison, execution

The Oklahoma bombing is an unusually complex case; Jones and Israel (2001) and Painting (2016) identified numerous unresolved questions about McVeigh's life. New information may necessitate a reconsideration of certain points.

Because of his contradictory statements, McVeigh's legal team knew that much of what he said was not true: "The better part of his adult life is predicated upon lies, deceptions, and cons. . . . Tim is a masterful manipulator and con man" (Jones & Israel, 2001, p. 255). Also, even though he was vilified for his attack, many reporters had surprisingly positive impressions of him. One said he was a "seemingly ordinary boy, someone who could be found in almost any average neighborhood in America" (Painting, 2016, p. 25). Another noted that McVeigh had "a boyish quality that defied the stereotypical image of an embittered radical" (Painting, 2016, p. 25).

Behind McVeigh's boyish ordinariness, he was indeed angry and bitter. He was also paranoid and hateful. He was obsessed with *The Turner Diaries*, a novel of vile bigotry in which Jews are evil and sadistic and African Americans are cannibalistic thugs who kill and eat White people. It portrays Whites fighting a war for the survival of their race. It's anti-everybody who is not White, as well as

against Whites who are liberal, and completely anti-everything America stands for in terms of "liberty and justice for all." It is a vision of White supremacy in which the bigots massacre every non-White person on Earth, completing the mission of Hitler to make Earth a solely Aryan planet.

McVeigh read this in his late teens and was enthralled with it the rest of his life. He bought copies and gave them to people he knew and sold copies at gun shows. In the book, anti-government forces use a truck bomb to destroy a federal building—the same method of attack that McVeigh used.

McVeigh immersed himself in White supremacist and neo-Nazi groups and joined the KKK (Painting, 2016, pp. 227, 260, 316). A fellow soldier called McVeigh "the most racist bastard I ever knew" (Painting, 2016, p. 154). McVeigh said, "[N]othing of great value has ever been accomplished or contributed by a black person" (p. 155). McVeigh railed against Jews and engaged in Holocaust denial, writing, "Where the hell could 6 million Jews 'appear' from, to be executed?" (p. 268, emphasis in original).

McVeigh's paranoia focused on the U.S. government, believing it was colluding with the United Nations and the so-called "New World Order" (an alleged international power elite). He not only believed these forces were going to confiscate people's firearms, but he also mailed his sister a publication about the government building massive crematoria and 130 concentration camps to exterminate those who disagree with federal policies. This pamphlet may have been the one he read titled, "United States Government or Nazi Germany?" He talked about the impending enslavement of mankind by global forces (Painting, 2016, p. 357).

He believed that the government created AIDS: "The U.S. government waged biological warfare against its citizens as a means of population control" (Painting, 2016, p. 289). He reportedly believed that infants "were being implanted with microchips as part of some kind of government experiment" (p. 377). According to a friend, "McVeigh inevitably began railing about secret conspiracies involving 'factions of the government who wanted to gain world domination' as well as the government's plans to set up 'concentration camps' for U.S. citizens" (p. 259). He also "railed against the center for Missing and Exploited Children because he felt they were part of a larger effort to track all individuals" (p. 484).

Even though he justified his attack as a response to the deaths at Ruby Ridge in 1992 and Waco in 1993, McVeigh had raged against the government for years. Before these events occurred, he wrote a letter to the editor that asked, "Is a civil war imminent? Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system?" (Painting, 2016, p. 247). In 1992—before Waco—he talked about burning down a federal building in Buffalo to destroy whatever personal data it had on people (p. 484).

Apparently in fear for his life, McVeigh kept guns stashed all over. A friend was shocked that "in each corner of the house were loaded rifles" (Michel & Herbeck, 2001, p. 152). In fact, "McVeigh had become convinced that his heritage, his income, and perhaps his very life were threatened. . . . At night, he worried about federal agents bursting into his room and seizing all his weapons. Paranoid? He didn't think so" (p. 160).

McVeigh believed he would eventually be viewed as a martyr or a hero (Michel & Herbeck, 2001, p. 166), expecting a statue in honor of him on the Washington Mall between the Capitol and Washington Monument (Jones & Israel, 2001, p. xiv). He was preoccupied with fame, commenting, "[W]hen I go people will know I've been here" (Painting, 2016, p. 377). His lawyer said, "Tim was intent on making sure the world knew what he had accomplished. He craved recognition, publicity, acknowledgment" (Jones & Israel, 2001, p. 60).

Do McVeigh's family background and childhood shed any light on his later dynamics? He was an accident-prone child, requiring frequent trips to the hospital. He also had serious childhood illnesses, including a bout of pneumonia at age 4 that resulted in a week in the hospital, and scarlet fever at age 5 that caused him to miss a week of kindergarten (Michel & Herbeck, 2001).

According to Michel and Herbeck, at age 10, McVeigh was "small and scrawny for his age," and in seventh grade, he was "tiny for his age" (2001, pp. 19, 27). He was twice beaten and humiliated by bullies in attacks that reportedly left emotional scars on him. He was so thin he was called "Noodle McVeigh" (p. 20); he was also called "Chicken McVeigh" because of his awkward gait (Serrano, 1998, p. 21). He reportedly was first picked on for being so short and later for being tall and awkward (Painting, 2016, p. 108).

McVeigh was a failure as an athlete and a disappointment to his father: "My dad, he's a jock. . . . I always felt like a failure to my dad. I wasn't a jock figure. . . . I was thin, gangly, not really coordinated. I didn't even know how to put on a jockstrap" (Painting, 2016, p. 108). He apparently struggled with his masculinity into adulthood; an army buddy said, McVeigh was "so vulnerable. . . . So unbalanced about being tough" (Savran, 1998, p. 209).

McVeigh grew up in a home where his parents yelled at each other and his father yelled at him. Both parents had psychological problems, with his father taking psychiatric medication and his mother having significant paranoia. Perhaps McVeigh's paranoia was a result of both a genetic predisposition and growing up with a mother who saw danger where it did not exist. In fact, there are reports that McVeigh had been treated for paranoid schizophrenia (Painting, 2016, pp. 288, 342). If this diagnosis was accurate, it means he was far more disturbed than has generally been recognized. McVeigh's mother also drank, had affairs, and eventually moved away. McVeigh raged against his mother to multiple people, calling her "whore" and "bitch" and blaming her for breaking up the family.

His sexual life is enigmatic. In court, he acted like a ladies-man, flirting with female journalists and telling his lawyers he would talk with any reporter as long as she was attractive. But when Barbara Walters was talking to him off-camera and asked whether he had a girlfriend, McVeigh turned "beet red" (Michel & Herbeck, 2001, p. 285). The would-be ladies-man was humiliated that he had no woman in his life.

In fact, McVeigh maybe never had a woman in his life. He claimed to have had an affair with a married woman while in high school, but none of his friends ever saw him with a woman. He claimed to have had a high school girlfriend for 6 months with whom he was sexually active and took to the prom, yet his peers reportedly never saw him with a girlfriend and stated that he did not attend the prom (Painting, 2016, pp. 124–125). Multiple people said that he did not date in high school or in the Army, with one of his buddies commenting, "[T]he truth was that girls scared the crap out of him" (p. 142).

Even after the Army, he reportedly never dated. He claimed to have had affairs with friends' wives, but the accuracy of this is unknown. David Hammer, a fellow inmate with McVeigh, wrote a book in which he claimed that McVeigh disclosed to him that he was a virgin; in fact, his nickname in prison allegedly was "virgin McVeigh" (Hammer, 2010, p. 20). In addition, there are ATF and FBI reports of interviews with a man who claimed to have had sexual encounters with McVeigh. Whether these reports are legitimate is unknown.

Perhaps in response to his frustrations with women, McVeigh called American women "prudish and stingy" and was angry and frustrated that he was not getting any sex, claiming that women were shortchanging men (Michel & Herbeck, 2001, p. 114).

Adding a further layer of complexity is that both a childhood neighbor of McVeigh's and members of McVeigh's defense suspected that his mother may have "encouraged her children to engage in inappropriate 'sexual situations'" (Painting, 2016, pp. 110, 111, 573: Note 46).

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of McVeigh's life, however, was failing to become a Green Beret. He enlisted in the Army to join special forces, and his failure began his downward spiral: "When he didn't get into Special Forces, his whole dream shattered … he just crumbled" (Painting, 2016, p. 222). Three months after leaving the Army, McVeigh had an episode of panic, despair, and suicidal thoughts (Painting, 2016, p. 248).

After the Army, McVeigh worked some low-level jobs for short periods and then ended up drifting around the country, sleeping on friends' sofas. For the last 2 years of his life before the attack, he was essentially unemployed, homeless, and alone.

One of the most striking aspects of McVeigh was his callousness during the trial. He showed no tears or remorse for his victims or his families and was nonchalant about the many children who were killed. He commented coldly, "We needed a body count to make our point" (Michel & Herbeck 2001, p. 300). When asked, "Tim, where did you go wrong?" he said, "I didn't go wrong" (p. 376).

Waco provided a rationale but was not the reason for the attack. Long before Waco, McVeigh fantasized about committing violence against the government. He was not wrong to be outraged by the loss of life at Waco. Many others, however, were appalled but did not seize on this to justify mass murder. He used Waco to claim that because a few people in the government did something bad, all government employees were evil and deserved to die. He even used a *Star Wars* analogy to justify mass murder: "Think about the people as if they were storm troopers in *Star Wars* … . They may be individually innocent, but they are guilty because they work for the Evil Empire" (Michel & Herbeck, 2001, p. 166).

McVeigh created an image of himself as the true American, the real patriot, the defender of the Constitution against a government that wanted to deny him his rights. After the attack, he was so utterly unmoved by the horror he had wrought that he referred to the surviving victims and their families as the "woe is me crowd" (Painting, 2016, p. 28). And he expected a monument on the Washington Mall.

4 | DISCUSSION

These brief profiles just touch on the complexity of the perpetrators' lives, but they provide sufficient information for several patterns and themes to be identified.

4.1 | "Failing at manhood" and "The Quest for Personal Significance"

The perpetrators were not simply young men who were poor athletes and could not get girlfriends; nor were they ordinary people who led insignificant lives. They were people who felt severely damaged, presumably to the point of shame—not for something they had done but for who they were. They responded to their sense of personal insignificance by seeking to make themselves powerful, famous, and/or heroes.

The perpetrators had body-related issues and suffered chronic and severe social failures, sometimes withdrawing from every major life domain and living an isolated existence. In addition, they were psychologically disturbed. Among the school shooters, Eric Harris was psychopathic, Seung Hui Cho and Adam Lanza were psychotic, Eric Houston was traumatized, and Elliot Rodger was both psychotic and psychopathic.

Of the two nonideological mass shooters, Holmes was psychotic and Shrout psychopathic. The ideological killers (McVeigh, Breivik, Roof) have three prominent traits in common: paranoia, grandiosity, and callousness. Roof seems to have schizotypal personality disorder. His lack of empathy could be a result of the emotional numbing that can occur in schizotypals. Alternatively, he may have been psychotic and psychopathic, with his psychopathy manifesting as what Millon and Davis (1996) categorized as a nomadic antisocial, which is a combination of antisocial and schizoid personality traits.

Breivik was found by one team of evaluators to be psychotic and the other team to be essentially psychopathic. Perhaps he was both; other killers have had both psychopathic and psychotic traits (Langman, 2015b). McVeigh seems to have had a blend of paranoid thinking and psychopathic traits,

including his grandiosity, his callousness, his lying and manipulation, and his ability to hide his seething rage and bigotry so well that he conned people into seeing him as an ordinary small-town American.

Many of the perpetrators were hostile toward women; sometimes this included their mothers (Lanza, Shrout, Breivik, McVeigh). They not only failed in the domain of love and sex, but often they had sexual issues and sometimes had damaged or dysfunctional genitals. Houston suffered injuries to his penis and was confused about his sexual orientation and perhaps his gender identity. Lanza was confused about his sexuality, defended pedophilia, may not have known his gender, and said he castrated himself. Breivik wanted men to castrate themselves to prove their commitment to the cause. Holmes had multiple "accidents" and injuries to his penis, which raises the possibility of self-mutilation. Harris fantasized about raping girls he knew. Also, both McVeigh and Breivik had highly sexualized mothers who have been suspected of engaging in sexually inappropriate behavior with them in their childhoods, and both men reportedly had secret homosexual contacts. These may be unfounded suspicions and false reports; alternatively, they may be significant pieces to the puzzle of these men's lives.

In addition, Rodger wanted the government to control human reproduction, Breivik wanted to outsource breeding to women in poorer countries, and Roof wanted to control breeding through "a forced sterilization program" (Roof, 2015, p. 13). The perpetrators' problems were far deeper than frustration with not having a girlfriend.

In response to their sense of inadequacy, the killers attempted several strategies to build stronger images for themselves. Many of them were obsessed with weapons, particularly Harris, Houston, Lanza, Shrout, and McVeigh. Former FBI profiler, John Douglas, said, "This obsession with weapons—a form of power—is an overcompensation for deep-rooted feelings of inadequacy" (Kifner, 1995, para. 18). Similarly, their attraction to ideologies of power such as Satanism, Nazism, and White supremacy seem to be compensation for inadequacy. Finally, several shooters engaged in sadistic fantasies. Harris reveled in the thought of mutilating someone. Rodger imagined flaying and beheading his victims. Breivik planned to behead the prime minister. Shrout drew a picture of burning a school administrator with gasoline. As noted earlier, sadism serves to elevate the perpetrator to a position of power.

In summary, the perpetrators' attacks can be understood as compensatory acts driven by the need to enhance a damaged self. Recognizing these dynamics means recognizing the difference between the shooters' rationales for violence and the psychological reasons for their attacks. For example, the political beliefs of the three ideological killers (Breivik, Roof, McVeigh) need to be contrasted to those of combatants in the Middle East. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is a real conflict over territory, governance, and self-determination. Unlike these situations, McVeigh, Breivik, and Roof were fighting nonexistent battles. Their political beliefs were paranoid delusions. The U.S. government was not going house to house to confiscate firearms, nor was it sending citizens to concentration camps and crematoria; the New World Order was not enslaving humanity—in fact, the New World Order did not exist. Similarly, African Americans were not engaged in a war to the death against White people, and Whites were not about to be annihilated as a race. Finally, liberal Norwegian politicians were not conspiring with Muslim insurgents to destroy White, Christian Europe.

4.2 | Limits of the study

First, the ten perpetrators covered here do not represent the full range of mass killers. Second, there are unanswered questions about the perpetrators and presumably significant information about their lives that will never be known. Finally, where more details are known, especially regarding their psychopathic traits and psychotic symptoms, there is not space here to provide all the available information.

4.3 | Implications for policy initiatives and violence prevention

The findings presented here can assist with identifying potential attackers by broadening the range of variables to be investigated when people are seen as violence risks. All ten perpetrators in this study had either disclosed warning signs to people in their lives or come to the attention of professionals in education, mental health, or law enforcement prior to their attacks. Nevertheless, none of the attacks were prevented. The more that is known about the factors driving someone toward violence, the more effectively can potential perpetrators be identified and stopped. Anyone involved in threat assessment and violence prevention should be trained to know the broad range of factors that contribute to mass violence.

Relying on warning signs alone may not be sufficient to detect the danger posed by potential killers. Gathering information about warning signs as well as other factors, such as a demonstrated lack of empathy, sadistic behavior, damaged masculinity, and paranoid thinking, broadens the picture and could help threat assessment teams and law enforcement agencies to look more closely at those cases that demonstrate a wider range of indicators of possible violence.

Regarding policy to prevent school shootings, most states do not mandate that schools create and maintain threat assessment teams. Making this a requirement for K–12 schools as well as for institutions of higher education could help prevent attacks throughout the educational spectrum. More broadly, advancing the knowledge and implementation of threat assessment processes across the country should be a national priority. As of this writing, there is a bill in the House of Representatives that supports this effort (H. R. 838, Threat Assessment, Prevention, and Safety Act of 2019), with an equivalent bill in the Senate (S. 265).

At the broader social level, multiple needs could be addressed through policy. These include increased funding for child protective services to minimize child abuse and improved access to mental health services. In addition, government-sponsored initiatives could help to educate the public about mental health problems and de-stigmatize the use of mental health services. Mass killers do not exist in a vacuum—their attacks are the culmination of years of dysfunction in multiple domains. Stronger social supports can contribute to preventing violence.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this study, I examined ten perpetrators of mass violence who engaged in a variety of types of attacks in different venues and for outwardly different reasons. All the perpetrators struggled with biological challenges, psychological disturbance, and social setbacks. They sought to compensate for their many failures and inadequacies by using violence to enhance their identities.

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